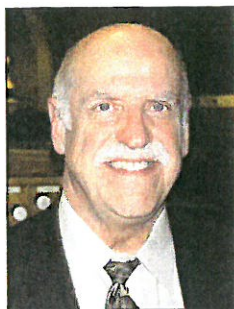


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LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS MEN (AND WOMEN)



There is a well-known anthem by Ralph Vaughan Williams entitled "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," based on Ecclesiasticus 44. While the text would not be considered gender appropriate by today's standards, a portion of it resonated with me recently: "Let us now praise famous men . . . renowned for their power, leaders of the people by their

counsels, and by their knowledge."

On November 6, 2016, I had the privilege of attending a special organ and choral concert at Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Md. The purpose of the concert was to honor past AGO President John Walker for his years of service to this wonderful congregation. The music, as you can well imagine, was of the highest caliber. Performers included Marie-Louise Langlais, past AGO President Eileen Guenther, Baltimore organists Michael Britt and Henry Lowe, and renowned local minister of music and pianist JoyAnne Amani Richardson. The chancel choir, under the direction of Michael Britt, presented three anthems, including two commissioned for John Walker. One of the organ pieces was also commissioned in his honor. The large audience was comprised of church members, family members, and dear friends of the honoree. A lovely reception followed the concert, giving people the chance to greet John and thank him personally.

While it sounds a bit sentimental on the surface, I don't know a better way to say it: one could feel the love in the room that afternoon. People had gathered with joy to honor one who was famous for the many years of service he had bestowed upon this congregation and the citizens of Baltimore. While posthumous recognition is never a bad thing, how meaningful it was that John was able to be present to experience the impact he had and continues to have on these people!

It is important to remember that we are all famous in varied ways, and the need to pay tribute to one another is a crucial part of who we are. So how do we honor the "famous" people with whom we come in contact? Those who have touched us in special ways? Those whose gifts and contributions may be easily taken for granted or, at the very worst, overlooked?

It begins on a personal level. In his column in the September issue of TAO, AGO Chaplain Don Saliers addressed the lost art of handwritten thank-you notes. This spoke to me on many

levels. Not to say that emails are insignificant, but the value of a tangible item expressing thanks and gratitude cannot be overstated. In years past I have sent thank-you letters to my first-grade teacher and to my very first organ teacher, among others. The returned gratitude from them was beyond my wildest expectations. The sharing of memories that ensued could fill a book of memoirs. Teachers often never hear from students again, even those with whom they had a special relationship.

Returning to the original premise of this article, liturgical musicians help mold the lives of all who pass through their houses of worship. Many people have wonderful recollections of favorite organists and prominent pieces they played. Others remember a favorite choir director who not only taught them memorable music but also created learning experiences and performance traditions that will remain in their hearts for a lifetime.

Our individual AGO chapters can also pay homage to those who have given so much and are still among them. It is a singular gift for chapters to honor longtime members with special meetings in their honor. Years ago Thomas Matthews, composer of the well-known anthem "The Lord Is My Shepherd," was celebrated in just such a way by the Tulsa chapter. After the dinner and business meeting at Trinity Episcopal

Church, we went into the choir stalls where we heard and sang much of the music of Dr. Matthews. And the best part was that he was there to feel our love and support.

As was the case with John Walker and Brown Memorial Presbyterian, churches can find much joy in celebrating the people among them who have so deeply enriched their lives. What a marvelous thing it would be for a church and an AGO chapter to cosponsor a special concert in honor of a church musician! I continue to be amazed at how many of our Guild members have been employed by a single church for 30, 40, even 50 years. This is evident almost every month when we read about their church celebrations in the Pipings department of this magazine.

While I find this gratifying and encouraging, it makes me wonder how many others have not yet been so honored. We owe it to these people, and ourselves, to pay tribute to them while we still have them with us.

If I may be permitted to tamper with a well-established text, "Let us now praise famous men and women." At the end of the day we will all be the better for it.

MICHAEL BEDFORD, AAGO, CHM

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HISTORIC CONCERT HONORS AGO PAST PRESIDENT

John Walker

BY SHIRLEY PARRY

The audience in the sanctuary was tense with anticipation at 3:00 P.M. on November 6, 2016, as the first notes of C. Hubert H. Parry's "I Was Glad When They Said Unto Me" rang out from the church's 1931 Skinner organ, Opus 839 (IV/45). The event was a Tiffany Series organ and choral concert honoring John C. Walker, immediate past president of the AGO. Baltimore's historic Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church was the perfect venue, with its superb acoustics and its towering Tiffany stained glass windows.

People had come from afar to celebrate this renowned organist, choral conductor, AGO leader, and most importantly, this deeply loved and most modest man. Paris's Marie-Louise Langlais was there, from Tulsa came Michael Bedford, the current AGO president, and from all over the Mid-Atlantic came John Walker's friends and other organ music lovers.

The concert featured tributes and performances by organists Langlais, Eileen Morris Guenther, Henry Lowe, and Michael Britt, and included premieres of choral works commissioned in Walker's honor performed by Brown Memorial's chancel choir.

Eileen Guenther, three-term past president of the AGO, recalled performing and working with John "since Moses was in the bullrushes." Guenther's French program began with Alain's *Litanies*, followed by Duruflé's *Prélude et Fugue sur le nom d'Alain*, Op. 7, the composer's tribute to his young friend whose career was tragically cut short when he was killed at the onset of World War II.

Henry Lowe, retired organist at Baltimore's Church of the Redeemer, played Bruce Simonds's 1924 *Prelude on Iam sol recedit igneus* ("As fades the glowing orb of day"). Noting that Simonds is not well known, Lowe explained that he chose this work because it makes use of many of the



Michael Britt conducts the final work, "Blessed Assurance," with Brown Memorial's chancel choir, John Walker (organ), and JoyAnne Richardson (piano)



Michael Britt, Marie-Louise Langlais, John Walker, Eileen Guenther, JoyAnne Richardson, Henry Lowe, and Barbara Baker

solo stops of the church's Skinner. This somewhat impressionistic piece is both a nature painting of the fading light of the sun at twilight and a meditation on the spiritual feeling evoked by the beauty of that time of day.

The program continued with the chancel choir's premiere of "Psalm 103," composed by pianist JoyAnne Amani Richardson, who directed The Riverside Church's Inspirational Choir when Walker was minister of music there. "John is a man of deep faith and he loves to worship. This is what I had in mind in this piece," she noted. In gospel style but using very contemporary harmonic language, it was directed by Barbara W. Baker.

Michael Britt, Brown Memorial's minister of music, who spoke of the way that Walker's presence in Baltimore "transformed all our lives for the better," played

Robert Hebble's *Litany for a Saint*, composed in memory of his parents. "It's a very emotional piece for me," he said, "and I only play it on very, very special occasions." Hebble begins the work with an original plainsong-like melody, and then creates sophisticated French-style harmonic variations on it. Britt's second piece was Joe Utterback's *Concert Samba for Organ*, another commissioned work. A fun, rhythmic work, it provided an effective contrast to the first piece.

Marie-Louise Langlais performed three compositions by Jean Langlais: "California Evocation" from *American Suite*, which recalled her first meeting with John Walker in Palo Alto in

1974, "Choral: Mon âme cherche une fin paisible" from *Neuf Pièces*, and "Pasticcio" from *Organ Book*, written for the celebration of André Marchal's daughter's wedding and played as "we celebrate a wedding between the music and you, dear John." She noted that Walker was in the lineage of great organists who had served at Brown Memorial Church, citing predecessors Virgil Fox and Richard Ross, a close friend of her late husband.

The final piece was Nancy Wertsch's "Blessed Assurance" that John Walker had commissioned for The Riverside Church choir. With Walker at the organ and JoyAnne Richardson on piano, this choral work, which Michael Britt directed, was a powerful conclusion to a historic concert.

Skinner Opus 839's voicing and versatility were evident throughout the program. Its lush celestes and orchestral stops make a superb accompanying instrument as well as an organ deeply suited to orchestral transcriptions. The bold foundation stops and thrilling chorus reeds were a perfect match for all of the repertoire performed by these outstanding artists.

Shirley C. Parry is chairperson of the Tiffany Series Committee at Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, Md